

DUXBURY HISTORY FILE HISTORY ROOM

RANDOM NOTES By Fisher Ames

Such thin promontories of sand and gravel as Duxbury's barrier beach look to the casual observer like mere dead bones of land without flesh, sinew or marrow, gnawed white clean by wind and sea. There is plenty of life, however, on and under its arid surface; much change, growth and decay.

At the rocky sections of our coast where the water is not too deep the sea gains a little in its battle with the land. To beaches like ours, moulded by time to the best passive resistance shape, the sea has had to grant the right to exist. Here the processes of destruction and construction take place alternately, offsetting each other. Sometimes the material dragged away by the backwash of storm surf is partially replaced at once by the current of sand streaming down from beaches and rock-mills to the north and by the glacial pebbles hurled up by the waves.

These pebbles are borne ashore buoyed up by rock-weed and laminaria or devil's-apron whose suckers are anchored to them. They are easily distinguished from beach pebbles, even without the adorning seaweed, by their irregular outline and many sides. In time as they grind together in the ceaseless awash they acquire the typical ovoidal shape of the beach pebble. Thus many pebbles become pills and the pills eventually become powder and another quota of sand is added to the beach. Some also remain to collect and bind the fine material brought in by gentle summer waves until a new smooth surface is laid down over them.

Once it was a very important light. The records are not complete but Duxbury built at least 263 vessels between 1780 and 1843, while Plymouth built 216 over a slightly longer period. The Gurnet Light must have figured largely in the comings and goings of that host of sails not to mention the visitors from other parts. New England ports, or

more properly, places where shipbuilding was going on, numbered 89 and of these Massachusetts had 34, whose record of vessels built was almost nine times that of all other New England States put together. Duxbury and Plymouth were first to start the industry in Massachusetts and they led in number of vessels built until their shallow waters could not cope with the growing demand for ships of a much larger tonnage.

From 1793 to 1835 were Duxbury's busiest years. Then the decline began and after 1843 ship building practically died out in the town. As the white sails grew fewer on one side of the barrier beach they thickened on the eastern side. The tall swift clipper ships were making their famous runs between Boston and Salem and other New England ports, and the far Orient. These were the last great deep-water sailing ships the beach was to see. It had seen its first some 800 years before when the blonde sea rover, Leif Ericson, came in his red clinker-built, dragon-prowed ship. Its broad sail hung low from the yardarm on its single mast and when the wind failed two banks of strong-armed oarsmen drove the vessel forward.

Other Norsemen probably saw our bay but nothing came of their visits. They took no interest in new lands, that offered no opportunities for loot or such fighting forays as their Saxons celebrated. Following the Vikings after a long blank interval came the seekers for a straight route to India and fabled Cathay: Gosnold, Martin Hobbler, Cabot, Verrazno, Captain John Smith; the records of their voyages are not very accurate. They, like the Norsemen, were not interested in the land that became New England. They looked upon it as an obstruction, a cruel barrier across their sea path to the riches in gold and silver, in spices and precious jewels of the Indies. It took 100 years for that sumptuous dream to die out.

These wandering explorers were

like sporting dogs trained in the pursuit of one kind of game and one kind only. Our land had little to offer them besides fresh water, a few wild fruits in season and sassafras. The oil from the root of that lauraceous tree, however, was much more valuable then, than it is now though it is still used medicinally and for flavoring. It grew in one or two sheltered spots on the bar and a few specimens exist at High Pines today. There is much of it on the mainland.

The vessels that Duxbury sent out past the Gurnet—schooners, brigs and ships—were sturdy craft not built for ocean racing like the clippers, of light tonnage most of them though Ezra Weston's ship "Hope," 880 tons, launched in 1841, was the biggest American vessel of her day. Mr. Weston could also number more sails in his cargo-carrying fleet than any other ship builder in the country.

In 1724 the English ship builders on the Thames complained that their best workmen were being lured to Duxbury and other American ports. The forests of England had already commenced to fall when the American colonies, still in their infancy, were amply supplied with the finest kind of material for shipbuilding. We had apparently inexhaustible supplies of white oak, tough, elastic and durable, and immense quantities of yellow pine and the straight white pine that was rated so valuable for shipbuilding that the King had the best of them marked and set aside for naval use in England. America offered more to the British carpenters than the wood to work with; they were exempt from military duty and favored in many other ways.

American shipping reached its maximum in 1826. In that year our vessels carried 95 per cent of our imports and 89.6 per cent of our exports, a percentage never equalled before or since.

"We were great then," one of the last of Duxbury's old salts said to me many years ago. "We did things," was his somewhat vague conclusion. He had just commented on a picture hanging on my study wall; "The last time I saw that fountain it wasn't water she was spouting, it was good red wine. Spain was celebrating the birth of the King's son. The feller with the long lip and big nose, Alphonso. I hung round that fountain considerable that day." So I learned that "Tubby" had been one, though a late member, of Duxbury's long line of seafaring men.

Tubby called himself a "bitter Democrat," but a kinder man it would have been hard to find. Short and thickest he stood sturdily on legs that were bowed, he explained, from trying to keep his equilibrium on rolling decks. He had been around the world several times but had seen very little of his native land. In that he was like the old Wellfleet seaman who had visited many foreign countries, but had "never had occasion to go as far as Chatham"—about 20 miles away.